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Visual Modernity in the Arab World, Turkey and Iran: Reintroducing the "Missing Modern" –

Introduction

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Notwithstanding the fact that opinions between art historians diverge on *how* it should be done, there is a consensus that nowadays the writing of art history cannot but be global, whether we label it "world art history" or "global art history". Whereas the two terms are often used synonymously, Hans Belting suggests we distinguish between "world art history", which would be the history of all art productions in the world since the earliest times, and "global art history," the history of art production as it has spread around the globe after the opening of the formerly uniquely Western art scene to the planet as whole.[1]

Even though "global art" is defined as contemporary art produced all around the globe since 1989 – the year of the ground-breaking Paris exhibition *Magiciens de la terre*[2] – even though it designates, that is, an art with many different facets but sharing a unified language in its diversity, we still notice, today, a difference in the way production from the "non-West" is considered. One cannot but get the impression that it is presented as if it had come out of nothing, born of a total void or of what had formerly been categorized as ethnographic artefacts. What is striking about this view is that it utterly neglects the existence of the modern phase that preceded the emergence of "global art" and that, from the nineteenth to the end of the twentieth century, saw Western art forms being adopted all over the world and replacing, to a large extent, local art conceptions and styles, thus giving way to a new, original category, generally and locally labelled as "modern art". In the specific case of art from the Islamic world, contemporary visual creations are often pigeon-holed as "contemporary Islamic art" as if they derived, ontologically,

1 Belting 2013.

2 See *Magiciens de la terre* 1989. In 2014, the Centre Pompidou came back to this exhibition with a documentary show: Cohen-Solal/Martin 2014.

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from former art practices peculiar to the region and not from the adoption of Western art in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century.

This mislabelling is due, among other issues, to two main factors: a field of research which is still in its infancy and, resulting from and directly tied to this, a generalized neglect of the initial phase in which art in its Western modality was introduced in the region.

1 Research on modern art in and outside the region

It is widely held that there is a lack of art historical writing in the region itself.[3] There is a part of truth in this, but even if there are only few programs on modern local art in Middle Eastern universities, a history of modern art from the region has been written in its vernacular languages for decades – as the few older examples mentioned here will show – and constitutes the foundation of an art historical narration in the countries concerned. Many writers of such texts are artists or art critics, but others do have art historical training. The Syrian ʻAfif Bahnasi for instance, author of *Modern art in the Arab Lands* (1980)[4] and *Pioneers of Modern Art in the Arab Lands* (1985),[5] the first surveys on the theme ever published, holds a Ph.D. in philosophy of art from the Sorbonne. His narration is, admittedly, strongly marked by his pan-Arab convictions, but he nevertheless develops an accurate art historical vision. A similar pan-Arab view is shared by the Iraqi artist and author of *Contemporary Visual Arts in the Arab Homeland* Shawkat al-Rubaʻi, who holds a degree from the Academy of Fine Arts in Baghdad.[6] On single countries of the Arab world, we have, to name a few examples, the excellent two-volume art history of Iraq by Shaker Hassan Al Saʻid, based on documents that he had access to in the fine arts archives created in Baghdad in the 1970s (and which were looted after the American invasion in 2003).[7] On Egypt, Rushdi Iskandar and Kamal al-Mallakh published *50 Years of Art in Egypt*, to mark the 50th anniversary of the School of Fine Arts in Cairo in 1962. A second, updated edition, coauthored by photographer and fine connoisseur of the Egyptian art

3 Shabout 2007: 46–48.
4 Bahnasi 1980.
5 Bahnasi 1985.
6 Al-Rubaʻi 1986.
7 Al Saʻid 1983 and 1988.

scene Subhi al-Sharuni – *80 Years of Art in Egypt, 1908–1988* – was published in 1991.[8] In 314 pages, the book retraces the history of modern art from the nineteenth century to the present. It introduces art groups, museums and art education, and includes sections on film set design, art books, caricature and graphic arts. Although lacking references and a bibliography, and including only poor-quality black-and-white illustrations, the book has become standard reading – maybe even a sort of "canon" – on the development of modern art in the country. Thus, although it does not correspond to Western academic standards, it seems difficult to neglect it as a source, and as a source of discourse on art in the country itself.

In Iran, the first writings on modern Iranian art date from the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s. They appeared in the form of articles, art criticism, exhibition reviews and interviews with, or biographies of, artists, and were published in journals, magazines or periodicals that enjoyed a broad readership. These pioneering texts were composed by artists, writers and intellectuals from other disciplines, who were rather entrenched in their political-ideological viewpoints. Given these backgrounds, such art criticism often lacked, as Hamid Keshmirshekan points out,[9] critical approaches and proficiency in methodical frameworks and Western art history and theory.

Regarding scholarly publications, most likely the first publication on Iranian modernism was *L'art moderne en Iran*, written by Akbar Tadjvidi in 1967.[10] Similarly pioneering were the essays composed by Ru'in Pakbaz, who, preferring to keep to Persian, wrote one of the most comprehensive sources on modern art in Iran during the 1960s and 1970s.[11] In *Contemporary Iranian Painting and Sculpture*, he provides an extensive overview of artistic movements in Western and Iranian art, analyzing their formal similarities. The series *Highlights of Persian Art*, published in 1979, was the first book on Iranian art to devote a chapter to Iranian modern art, in the form of an article by Ehsan Yarshater on contemporary Persian painting.[12] It maps the Iranian art scene from the 1940s through to the 1970s and is the last art historical work on modernism written before the revolution.[13] Interest for the artistic activities of former generations has grown since the 1990s, in and outside Iran. An example is Javad Mojabi's Persian and English bilingual publication *Pioneers of Contemporary Persian Painting: First*

8 Iskandar/Mallakh 1962 and Iskandar et al. 1991.
9 Keshmirshekan 2013: 18.
10 Tadjvidi 1967.
11 Pakbaz 1974.
12 Yarshater 1979.
13 For more information see McKenna 2012.

Generation Tehran,[14] in which he compiled interviews, biographies and critical analyses of the pioneers of modern art in Iran in the 1940s and 1950s.

On Turkey, the standard readings on modern Turkish art are Nurullah Berk's and Hüzeyin Gezer's *50 years of painting and sculpture* (1973) and Kaya Özsezgin's *History of Turkish Contemporary Art. From the Beginning to the Present Day*, published in 1980.[15]

Even though some of these writings might not reach the standards that are usual in the North American and European context, it seems difficult to ignore them when studying art history of the region since, as James Elkins points out, "they count, in their nations and institutions, as art history".[16]

North-Atlantic art history, to use James Elkins' critical term for North American and European domination in art history,[17] has, until now, largely neglected the modern arts from the Middle East in comparison to other fields of research, including Islamic art, a term that designates the arts of the region from the beginning of the Islamic era in the seventh century CE to the end of the eighteenth century. Few authors have dealt with the theme. The main references in English, largely quoted, are Wijdan Ali's *Contemporary Islamic Art* (1997) and Nada Shabout's *Modern Arab Art. Formation of Arab Aesthetics* (2007), both published by the University of Florida Press. Ali, who holds a Ph.D. in Islamic Art from the University of London, argues that there is a continuity between Islamic and contemporary art, which manifests itself in what she calls the "calligraphic school". Her book summarizes the history of modern art in most countries of the region. Shabout, an art historian and professor at the University of North Texas in Dallas, curator of the opening exhibitions at the Mathaf in Doha,[18] went exploring to find out if there is a peculiar "Arab" aesthetic in modern art from the Arab world. Giving a kind of "regional Arab" response to Ali, she finds this aesthetic in the *hurufiyya* movement, which adopted the letters of the Arabic alphabet as a basic shape of composition. Although consecrated to the Arab world as a whole, the book's focus is on Iraq, with special attention devoted to the exiled Iraqi painter Dia Azzawi. My own *A la recherché d'une modernité arabe*, published in 1996 in French and translated in 2008 into Arabic, deals with the construction of an artistic modernity in the Arab world, taking Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq as three exemplary case studies on the question.[19]

14 Mojabi 1998.
15 Berk/Gezer 1973 and Özsezgin 1980.
16 Elkins 2015: 211.
17 http://www.jameselkins.com/index.php/experimental-writing/251-north-atlantic-art-history.
18 Shabout 2010.
19 Naef 1996.

In the last few years, a number of monographs have been dedicated to single countries. In her *Creative Reckonings, The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (2006), the anthropologist Jessica Winegar draws on both field work and historical research to retrace the emergence of a contemporary art scene in Egypt. In 2013, Patrick Kane, instructor at Sharjah University, published *The Politics of Art in Modern Egypt. Aesthetics, Ideology and Nation Building*. Kane, a student of Marxist Middle East historian Peter Gran, aims to situate the history of modern art in its social and political context. This is an aspect, Kane feels, that "Anglo-American art history" has neglected. Lilian Karnouk's earlier *Modern Egyptian Art, 1910–2003* (2005), resulting from the merger of her two previous books, gives a good general survey of the question and has a rich iconographic documentation, but is largely descriptive. Karnouk, herself an artist, had taught at the American University of Cairo. Anthropologist Kirsten Scheid's 2005 Princeton thesis *Painters, Picture-Makers, and Lebanon: Ambiguous Identities in an Unsettled State*, is now in print. On Morocco, Kenza Sefrioui wrote in 2013 a history of the literary aspects of the 1960s and 70s intellectual and politically committed journal *Souffles*,[20] and Katarzyna Pieprzak's exploration of *Imagined Museums* (2010)[21] deals partly with the art scene and the issue of modernity in Moroccan art. The doctoral research done by Tzvetomira Tocheva, whose sudden death in 2014 stopped its publication, should not be forgotten here.[22]

Picturing Iran: Art, Society and Revolution, edited by Shiva Balaghi and Lynn Gumpert and published at the occasion of an exhibition held at New York University's Grey Art Gallery, which possesses an important collection of modern Iranian art, was probably the first publication in English dealing with this topic, while Tallinn Grigor's *Contemporary Iranian Art* (2014) focuses on the period after the Islamic Revolution.[23] Hamid Keshmirshekan, who obtained his PhD from London's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in 2004, started to conduct systematic research on modern and contemporary Iranian art. In defining and establishing terminologies and relevant concepts, he undertook a thorough, critical analysis of the field. Keshmirshekan made fundamental contributions by means of numerous publications, one of the first of which was based on his doctoral thesis and titled "Neo-traditionalism and Modern

20 Sefrioui 2013.

21 Pieprzak 2010.

22 *Naissance et évolution de l'art contemporain au Maroc (de 1912 à nos jours)*, Strasbourg, Université Marc Bloch, 2011.

23 Balaghi and Gumpert 2002; Grigor 2014.

Iranian Painting: The Saqqa-khaneh School in the 1960s".[24] Fereshteh Daftari, who received her PhD in art history on *The Influence of Persian Art on Gaugin, Matisse and Kandinsky* from Columbia University in 1988, mainly works on global modernities and cross-cultural currents. This is discussed in numerous of her works; an invaluable reference is "Another Modernism: An Iranian Perspective".[25]

On the late Ottoman Empire and Turkey, pioneering work in English has been done by Wendy M.K. Shaw, with her *Possessors and Possessed* (2003), on the institution of museums, and *Ottoman Painting* (2011), relating the birth of art in the Western modality in the late Ottoman/early Republican period.[26]

In addition to numerous exhibition catalogues – the listing of which would go beyond our purpose [27] – collectors like Saeb Eigner or Hussain Ali Harba have started publishing their collections.[28] Monographs and catalogues on single artists have also appeared recently, for instance – to speak only of the Arab world – on Lebanese abstract painter Shafik Abboud (1926–2004),[29] on sculptor Saloua Raouda Choucair[30] and artist and writer Etel Adnan.[31] The *catalogue raisonné* is a rare event: examples are those produced by the Sursock Museum in Beirut on two of the major painters of the pioneers' generation, Omar Onsi and Mustafa Farroukh, in Arabic and French.[32]

2 The "Missing Modern"

Contemporary art[33] from the region has received scholarly attention in the last years and has been the object of several exhibitions; the modern period

24 Keshmirshekan 2005.
25 Daftari 2002.
26 Shaw 2003; Shaw 2011.
27 For a partial list of exhibitions on the Middle East, see Farzin 2014.
28 Eigner 2010 and Schroth 2013. The Barjeel Art Foundation in Sharjah issued a book to accompany the four exhibitions of its collection at the Whitechapel Gallery in London: Kholeif/Stobbs 2015.
29 Le Thorel 2014.
30 Morgan 2013.
31 Fattal 2011, Obrist and Crumb 2012, Obrist et al. 2015.
32 Agémian 1997 and Moustafa Farroukh 2002.
33 Understood as a new artistic paradigm developing from the 1960s on as defined by French art sociologist Nathalie Heinich. Heinich 2014.

(end nineteenth century–1980s) – including academism and "classical modernity" – has largely been occulted. This is, of course, not only true of the Middle East but of all the regions whose contribution to the modern "canon" is only beginning to be recognized. Those alternative or "other" modernities have for long been considered as pale imitations of the Western model and, as such, not worthy of attention. Many authors have written on this and shown that modernity can have different meanings in different contexts, challenging the Western idea of modernity as the West's exclusive belonging.[34] Catherine Dossin and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel suggest that studying the circulation of art, artists and ideas between countries and continents might give another perspective on the theme and allow us to see the artworks in their own contexts.[35] This logic is closely related to the concept of "cultural transfer", as developed by French historian Michel Espagne.[36] As Espagne explains, when a cultural production is transferred or translated from one culture to another, although taking with it part of the original meaning, it acquires another one in its new context. Much more than being a simple copy or transposition, it becomes a new creation, and takes on a new meaning. This understanding of how artefacts wander from one place to the other eliminates the notion of cultural hierarchy, because it acknowledges the receptor's agency and his or her capacity to go beyond mimicry. While comparison always implies a hierarchy, the notion of cultural transfer allows us to understand how artefacts, forms and ideas circulate and by doing so, assume new shapes and meanings.

Rather than conceiving of art production from the Middle East as a "rearguard of the avant-garde", as a Geneva art history professor labeled it in the 1980s, seeing it as a form of cultural transfer enables us to grasp its meaning in the contexts in which it was created. We can then discern the new or different "raison d'être" it acquires in a Middle Eastern environment. This is the perspective adopted here, the aim of which is to reintroduce the "missing modern" in the art history of the modern Middle East and in art history in general, in order to better understand contemporary productions and their relevance in the region itself. Its other purpose is to highlight the contribution of the Arab world, Turkey and Iran to the global modern, from the early academic attempts at producing art in the Western modality in the nineteenth and twentieth century to the modernist period in the 1960s and 1970s.

34 Weibel 2013, Ramirez/Olea 2004, and others.

35 Dossin/Prunel 2015.

36 Espagne 2013.

3 Contributing to the writing of the region's art history

As the above lines have made clear, there is relatively little written on modern Middle Eastern art. However, the topic has found increasing interest with young researchers and, step by step, important gaps in the literature are starting to be filled. Thus, one can reasonably guess that in ten years time, an average student or researcher will have much more complete published material at his or her disposal when studying modern art of the Islamic lands.

In the meanwhile, this special section of *Asiatische Studien/Etudes Asiatiques* aims to give a glimpse of recent research on modern art and modernity in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA region), with a choice of articles in both English and French.

Why publish a special section on the visual arts in the Middle East in an issue of *Asiatische Studien/Etudes asiatiques*, the journal of the Swiss Asia Society?

First, this collection of essays aims to show to researchers working on the Middle East and beyond that the visual arts may constitute an alternative way through which to approach the political, social and cultural situation of the region and that they are far from being marginal. As Christiane Gruber and Sune Haugbolle wrote in 2013, "Tackling visual materials and practices of image-making and spectatorship in Middle Eastern contexts is an important undertaking, particularly in the light of the flawed notion that images do not exist or are prohibited in Islam".[37] Image-making is, contrary to this assumption, an old and constant practice in the region,[38] although the production of art in the Western modality is a modern phenomenon, starting in the nineteenth century. The interest in the visual arts has recently become part of the cultural practices of the local elites, as the constant increase in artistic activities in the Gulf and elsewhere confirms. What seemed to be a domain reserved to a few connoisseurs has now reached a much larger audience and does have to be considered as one aspect of cultural expression by those who work on the region.

Secondly, these papers emphasise that research on visual expression in the Islamic world, modern and ancient, is part of the Swiss academic landscape, a fact often ignored. In the field of modern and contemporary art from the Middle East, besides the work done by Silvia Naef at the University of Geneva (Unité d'arabe) since many years, the University of Bern has introduced such teachings at the Institut für Kunstgeschichte, with Wendy M.K. Shaw (2009–2014) and,

37 Gruber/Haugbolle 2013: xi.

38 Naef 2015, Elias 2012.

since 2015, Nadia Radwan. Three research projects dealing entirely or partly with the visual arts in the Middle East are presently funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNF). "Other Modernities: Patrimony and Practices of Visual Expression Outside the West" (2013–2017) gathers the three teams of Silvia Naef, Irene Maffi (University of Lausanne) – a specialist of patrimonial practices in the Arab world – and Wendy M.K. Shaw (FU Berlin).[39] Within the larger project "Theory and Practice of Authenticity in Global Cultural Production", Kornelia Imesch Oechslin's group at the University of Lausanne (Section d'histoire de l'art) focusses on "Authenticity and Hybridity in Culture, Art and Architecture of the Greater Middle East" (2014–2017).[40] At Zurich University of the Arts, Marion von Osten and her colleagues explore the visual positions of the Moroccan intellectual magazine *Souffles* ("Ästhetik der Dekolonisierung. Das Magazin *Souffles* (1966–1972)", 2014–2016).[41] In Islamic art – i. e. art in Islamic lands between the seventh and the eighteenth/nineteenth century – a chair has been created in Zurich at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in 2010. Markus Ritter held it until 2012 and was succeeded by Francine Giese, who presents in this issue of the *Asiatische Studien/Etudes asiatiques* an overview of her research project "Resplendence of al-Andalus. Exchange and Transfer Processes in Mudéjar and Neo-Moorish Architecture".

Thus, this thematic collection of articles reflects the development of academic activities in a field that has received increased attention in Switzerland and elsewhere in the last decade.

The articles are grouped around three themes: modern art's relation to pre-modern forms of visual expression in the region – Islamic, pre-Islamic or popular – (Becker, Diba, Montazami), the circulations of genres, forms, and artists (Artun, Bombardier, Correa, Helbig, Radwan), and the impact of political ideologies on art production (Atallah, Bank, Nakhli, Schmidt von Osten).

The relation to pre-modern forms of visual expression has been one of the main issues of art production in the region. In her paper "Congeries beyond Categories: Approaching the Complex Actuality of Art Practices in the Early Turkish Republic", Martina Becker shows that even in the Turkish context, where Westernisation had become a strong political priority, reference to the local did not completely disappear. She illustrates, through a re-reading of certain works of Malek Aksel (1903–1987), the ambiguity inherent in the radical modernisation process Turkey went through. Layla Diba's "History, Identity, Memory: Nikzad

39 http://www.other-modernities.com/

40 http://www.cgs.unibe.ch/unibe/portal/fak_historisch/fsuf/cgs/content/e112723/e112870/e335859/e335870/pane335878/e335929/files335930/Authenticity_SubC_ger.pdf

41 https://www.zhdk.ch/index.php?id=73291.

Nodjoumi's *Arzhang*" discusses the Iranian painter's re-elaboration, in the 1960s, of the pre-Islamic myth of Arzhang in an attempt to build a contemporary pictorial language rooted in tradition, and reflects on the question of re-employment of historical material. In a similar vein, Morad Montazami ("Ornements transfrontières/avant-gardes marocaines : entre ésotérisme et post-colonialisme") reviews the attempts of Ahmed Cherkaoui, Farid Belkahia and the Casablanca School at creating a locally rooted contemporary and post-colonial abstract art in Morocco in the 1960s and 1970s by referring to the ornament.

The circulation of ideas, but also of forms and genres, or of single works of art, has become a priority research theme among historians and art historians. In "*Dal Cairo a Roma*. Visual Arts and Transcultural Interactions Between Egypt and Italy", Nadia Radwan highlights the essential although mostly neglected role that Italy played in the development of an Egyptian art scene in the first decades of the twentieth century. Italian artists living in Egypt were active as teachers; scholarships enabled students to study in Italy, and the creation of the Egyptian Academy in Rome as well as the hosting of Egyptians at the Italian pavilion at the 1938 Venice Biennale were crucial to the consolidation of the local art scene. In her contribution "Modernism in Arab Sculpture. The Works of Mahmud Mukhtar (1891–1934)", Elka Correa points to the fact that the founder of modern Egyptian sculpture, Mahmud Mukthar, was as much a product of the Parisian environment he lived in during the 1920s and early 1930s as of his country of origin. His works, although referring to Pharaonic models, are primarily rooted in *art déco* and the then prevailing return to classical forms. Deniz Artun discusses the role copies of famous Western paintings, in this case Ingres' *Grande Odalisque*, played in the reflections of Turkish artists from the nineteenth century onwards and more generally, exemplifies the creative implications of copying ("'Am I obliged to imitate you?' On Copying the *Grande Odalisque* for the Ottoman Collection of Paintings Elvah-ı Nakşiye"). Both Alice Bombardier and Elahe Helbig deal with modernist art movements in Iran. Bombardier ("L'avant-garde picturale des années 1940 en Iran. Premières galeries, associations et revues d'art") renders in detail the constitution of an artistic field – in the sense described by Pierre Bourdieu – in the early 1940s scene in Tehran and resituates it within the broader cultural context of the time. Helbig refers to a later period and another media and shows, through the pioneering work of Ahmad Aali (born 1935), how the role of photography shifted from a documentary to an artistic one during the 1960s and 1970s. Aali, who never travelled abroad and spoke only Persian, developed a modernist language of his own, comparable to the one Western artists like Duane Michals employed at the time ("A New 'Vision': Early Works of Ahmad Aali and the Emergence of Fine Art Photography in Iran (1960s–1970s)").

Political ideologies, nationalism in particular, have had an impact on art production. Principally in the Arab world, where the dream of a united – and modern – Arab nation did not materialise, this question has been at the center of artistic quests. Nadine Atallah presents this hope and disillusionment through Marwa Arsanios' *Al-Hilal* project, an ongoing work begun in 2011 to illustrate what could be called the "past of the future", i.e. the futurist projections of Egypt's optimistic Nasserist era ("*Words as Silence, Language as Rhymes* by Marwa Arsanios. Modernism, Feminism and Science Fiction"). Alia Nakhli critically digs into one of the attempts to create a pan-Arab artists' organization, as was the purpose of a 1972 meeting organized by the General Union of Arab Visual Artists in the Tunisian town of Hammamet. She shows that what had looked like a strong, federating movement did not survive the political agenda of the moment and did not impact the Tunisian art scene ("La production des récits dans les manifestations panarabes : l'exemple du colloque sur les styles contemporains des arts plastiques arabes (1972)"). Marion Schmidt von Osten ("Aesthetics of Decolonisation – The magazine *Souffles* (1966–1972)") tackles the question from the "Third-World" perspective – as it used to be termed at the time – of the Moroccan political and cultural magazine *Souffles*, which in the 1960s and 70s strove to create a new, revolutionary aesthetic, expressing not only local, but global aspirations to the decolonisation of thought and visuality. And, finally, Charlotte Bank suggest another approach to Syrian painter Tawfiq Tariq's (1875–1940) Orientalist-styled compositions, which she reads as an expression of his nationalist feelings ("Painting as Critique: Oil Painting as a Site for Social and Political Negotiation in Syria").

With this varied collection of case studies, the editors would like to contribute to the search for the still "missing Middle Eastern modern" and thus advance the debate about multiple modernities and the necessity of an inclusive, not exclusively Western, art historical narration. This is not only a question of "political correctness", an attitude often disqualified, especially in Europe. The opening up to other regions of the globe allows the discovery of an often ignored creativity, which is not a provincial copy of Western grandeur, but a creation or a recreation of its own. This is what we hope that the following pages will convincingly show, in addition to the richness of a field of research that has witnessed a remarkable expansion over the last few years.

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